Kursk submarine to be brought to surface

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Moscow - Russia confirmed on Wednesday that the submarine Kursk, sunk by mysterious explosions in August last year with the loss of all 118 sailors on board, would be salvaged from the Barents Sea and brought back to dock by September 20.

Deputy Prime Minister Ilya Klebanov said Dutch heavy transport firm Mammoet would charge Russia less than expected to help it lift the nuclear-powered Kursk and had won the contract at the last minute after pledging to get the job done this year.

Klebanov said that Mammoet had agreed not to announce the size of the contract or details of the technology that divers would use to cut away the vessel's torpedo bay, which was ripped open by two unexplained blasts.

"We will begin the lift on September 15 and by September 20 Kursk will be in dock," Klebanov said, adding that the Barents Sea was usually calm enough in September.

Mammoet, which admits to having little salvage experience, won the contract unexpectedly from a consortium comprising Dutch firms Smit Internationale and Heerema and US company Halliburton.

Smit said the group could not safely raise the Kursk this year, but has since accepted Mammoet's invitation to join in the project which Klebanov initially predicted would cost about $70-million (about R560-million).

Klebanov said the consortium's offer to do the job in 2002 was unacceptable, and Mammoet had stepped into the breach.

Russia has pledged to lift the Kursk to avert possible environmental damage and return the victims' bodies to their families. Tests around the site have shown no sign of radioactivity from the vessel's two nuclear reactors. - Reuters

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